

Paper 2

Resource Guide to Selected Federal Policies Affecting Children's Social and Emotional Development and Their Readiness for School

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Introduction

Efforts to improve services for young children and their families have become a high priority for the nation's leaders, including officials in the executive branches of federal and state governments, state legislatures, schools, professional associations, and philanthropic organizations. The enactment of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 affirmed this national commitment to children's early development, articulated in the first goal that states "By the Year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn" (DOE, 1994). Three objectives that emphatically articulate both parental and national responsibility for all children support this overarching goal. These objectives include the following:

1. All children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate pre-school programs that help prepare children for school;
2. Every parent in the United States will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping his or her pre-school child learn; and parents will have access to the training and support parents need;
3. Children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and to maintain the mental alertness necessary for learning; and the number of low birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems. (DOE, 1994)

These goals and objectives address the following five dimensions of early development and learning, as described by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP):

1. physical well-being and motor development;
2. social and emotional development;
3. approaches to learning;
4. language development; and
5. cognition and general knowledge. (NEGP, 1994, p. 3)

The NEGP report notes that these "five dimensions are inextricably linked" (p. 4) and states that social and emotional development serve "as the foundation for relationships that give meaning to school experience" (p. 3). The NEGP defines emotional characteristics as those that involve the individual's feeling states regarding the self and others. It stresses that the personal well-being and self-confidence that allow a child to interact effectively with teachers and peers in school are built on positive, stable interactions with one or a few key caregivers in early childhood. These interactions provide the positive regard, unconditional love, and support that are the building blocks of healthy emotional development.

The federal government has made a significant investment in children's social and emotional well-being, yet now, in the year 2000, the first national edu-

cation goal has not been met, and too many children do not arrive at school “ready to learn.” The missions of many federal agencies include components of a system of early childhood care. As Newacheck et al. (1998) report, between 1990 and 1994, the number of federal categorical programs funding children’s services increased from 300 to nearly 500 programs. Although categorical programs allow government to respond directly to emerging needs, they also often differ in eligibility requirements, application processes, and length of participation. In an attempt to address the developmental risks in early childhood, the government has made a continuous investment of resources, resulting in a proliferation of federal agencies and programs related to the growth and development of young children and their readiness to learn. As a result, publicly funded services for young children and their families are often fragmented. This is particularly true for children who, because of exposure to multiple risk factors, receive services from numerous agencies and programs.

To address this problem, the Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network initiated an examination of risk factors for problems in the transition to school and selected federal policies that affect these developmental risks. This resource guide to federal policies is a companion to “Risk Factors for Academic and Behavioral Problems at the Beginning of School,” a paper by Lynne Huffman, Sarah Mehlinger, and Amy Kerivan in this publication. In that report, the authors reviewed scientific literature to identify factors that put a child at risk for poor transition to elementary school. That study discussed thirty-two risk factors in four categories: individual child, family and peers, child care and schools, and neighborhood and community.

This paper examines selected federal policies that address those identified risk factors. It groups federal policies into five domains: child health, early childhood care and education, family support and child welfare, child nutrition, and socioeconomic status. Some federal policies may be complementary, and some policies may overlap, illustrating not only the complexity of collaborative efforts on the part of the implementing agencies but also the diversity of partnerships supporting school readiness. However, the multiplicity of federal agencies addressing similar concerns creates difficulty in coordinating efforts to ensure that all children are ready to learn. Equally important are the gaps in federal policy and the inadequacy of programs to reach all children in need. Table 1 (on page 100–101) relates the federal policies to the risk factors in Huffman et al. (2000), and the Appendix presents summary tables of the selected federal policies discussed in this document.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to serve as a resource guide to selected federal policies and programs addressing specific factors that place a child at risk for a successful transition to school. The federal policies included in this guide represent five policy domains: child health, early childhood care and education, family support and child welfare, nutrition, and socioeconomic status. The authors selected them on the basis of each policy's relevance to the risk factors identified by Huffman et al. (2000), the amount of the federal budget appropriation, and/or the number of eligible individuals served. The authors reviewed federal legislation and regulations, other government documents, scientific papers, and reports. In addition, the authors conducted telephone interviews with 25 individuals knowledgeable about specific policies or policy areas.

The Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network suggested the organizational structure for this paper, which includes identifying the history and mission, funding level, eligibility criteria, nature of the intervention, and intended outcomes and indicators for each policy. Readers should note that most of the policies discussed in this guide support services to children of all ages, and in some cases, adults as well. Often it was not possible to identify funding levels specific just to children from birth to six years of age. In those cases the total funding levels are reported. At the federal level, the identification of outcome measures and indicators is in an ongoing process of development in response to the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. The information presented in this report is current as of May 2000. The dynamic, changing nature of public policy would require ongoing revision of this document to maintain it as an up-to-date resource.